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Information Acceptance and ICT Resistance: Promoting the Role of Information in Rural Community Development

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Introduction

Information is vital for community development. Nyerere (1967) states that, “while other countries aim to reach the moon, we must aim for the time being at any rate to reach the villages by providing them with necessary information.” Information can eradicate ignorance and help achieve economic, social, political, and cultural objectives toward the development of the entire community.

Information in a coherent form can raise aspirations, by turning people from fatalism and fear of change to a desire for a better life and the determination to work for it. This creates an intellectual climate that stimulates people to take a look at their current practices and future perspectives. Ideally, information brings about knowledge. No community can develop without knowledge, and a community can only become knowledgeable by information as a tool for development. Mchombu (2003) states that the contradiction between the vital role of information in development and its lack of official recognition in developing countries can hardly escape the attention of information specialists.

Stone (1993) highlights the irony in the fact that people developing countries have the least awareness of the use of information to overcome underdevelopment. Part of the reason lies in the role of information providers, government, politicians and policymakers. According to Stone (1993), “the challenge, therefore, is to produce valid models in which the socioeconomic impact of information activities could be assessed. In turn, such orientation would result in the design and creation of impact-being information programs and services.” If such impact can be demonstrated, it would increase the support of information as a vital resource in development.

Rural communities' information is largely hidden and not much has been discovered by researchers (Mchombo, 1992, MacAnny 1978, Rosenberg 1993 and Mumtaz et al 1998). The application of information needs, services, and systems to rural communities' development needs to be studied. It is also not surprising that many rural communities of the developing countries are aware of the existence and importance of libraries and other information agencies, but are not aware of the role of information in development. Chester, et al., (2006) asserts that information professionals and their intermediaries should reach out and assist community members.

Outreach to rural communities should address the following objectives:

- Identify the information they need or enable them to identify the types of information they may need;
- Provide the information they need or assist them to identify and use appropriate information sources (including experts and other human resources);
- Enable them to evaluate the information available or provided in relation to the purpose on hand;
- Enhance the community's information literacy, and
- Train and assist them to use ICT for inter-personal as well as wider global communication.

Reaching Rural Communities through ICT

Kularatne (1997) points out that information is a fundamental resource for development, but even when the necessary information is available, not everyone benefits from it. There are sectors in society that are better informed than others. This disparity is more visible in developing countries. In these countries, a majority of the people live in rural areas (Metcalf 1984). Rural communities are often left out of the existing information flow.

Connecting rural communities to the global network is made possible with ICT. When carefully designed and implemented, ICT can establish a network for preserving, ordering, and transmitting information to rural communities, but providing infrastructure, hardware, and software alone is not sufficient. In order to empower individuals, they must be equipped with the necessary skills. Kombo (2001) observes that “the use of information is dependent on ways which it serves to meet the needs of users. Likewise, information that is not directed to the needs of the users is not of any significant use.”

Access to information in rural communities is affected by a number of barriers, such as infrastructure, low level of literacy, lack of proper information services, technical competencies, and lack of proper information policy and governance directed to rural communities. Despite the potential of ICT, technological barriers are perhaps the most challenging aspect to be addressed. Pushing ICT into rural communities could create resistance, because it requires a new set of skills and competencies. If not properly planned and developed, ICT could be perceived as a threat to rural communities. Pushing ICT to be accepted as an agent of change could lead to resistance to ICT as shown in figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Resistance to Technology as change agent

Promoting Information in Rural Community Development

Since information enhances innovation, as described by Bell (1979), “the changing pattern of the new information age, the dependence upon information to create innovation and change; places a high premium on the ability of nations to access and use information to create advances in the society.” Information resources are building blocks of civilization. It was confidently postulated by Swank (1971) that no society can advance beyond a certain point without effective access to its collective memory of records, and an advanced society that loses control of its records will regress.

Introducing ICT to rural communities could result in resistance, and introducing the need for information can reverse the effect. Creating a demand for information that serves rural communities will initiate the process of information seeking. Convincing rural communities of the importance of information will result in acceptance of information as a key for development. The ultimate goal is to be “information-haves” rather than “technology-haves.” Rural communities must discover the information that is relevant to their activities. Figure 2 below suggests that creating awareness of the role of information will definitely bring rural communities to accept, seek, and use it.



Figure 2. Acceptance of information as change agent

Raising awareness will require understanding of the community. Understanding will allow design of information products and services, including packaging and repackaging of local information.

Model of ICT for Development

Using ICT can only be achieved when rural communities value information and are ready to seek and use it regardless of the distance, format, or medium. Information acceptance will significantly contribute to the acceptance of ICT. This provides a framework where ICT acceptance can be achieved through information acceptance. In this model, ICT is conceived as the enabler or tool for development (Figure 3).

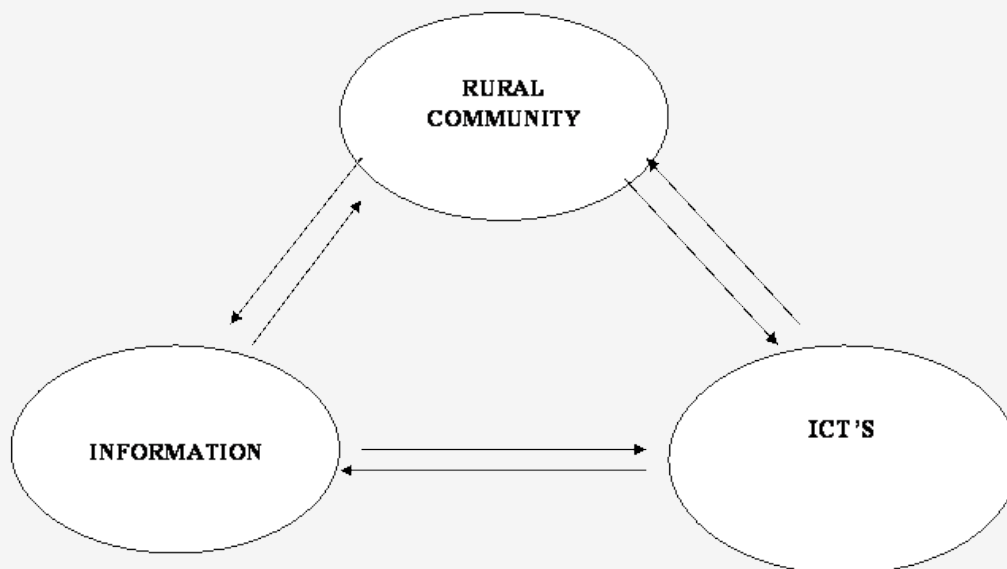


Figure 3. Acceptance of ICT as tool for development through information acceptance.

The figure shows that ICT has become the medium or container of information and a key enabler to development. As such, greater awareness and understanding on the role of ICT must be conveyed to rural communities. For example, the Internet is an important component in bridging the digital gap; however, while one needs to master the content of the Internet, it can only be done by knowing how to use the technology.

Accepting information as an important commodity will call for all stakeholders to change their strategy from establishing digital divide initiatives that are technology-driven to those that are community-based and information-driven. The emphasis would be on directing educating and training rural communities on how to find and use information through ICT. The demand for information will create a parallel demand for ICT. Thus, rural communities will be more ready to accept ICT, since they will be the ones looking or demanding information.

Conclusion and Recommendations

ICT is a key enabler in the empowerment of rural communities in developing countries. Resistance to ICT adoption can be overcome by information acceptance. Reversing ICT resistance through information acceptance among rural communities in developing countries requires several immediate and important tasks to be addressed as below:

Revisit the role of information in society

Establishing “what is information” for rural community dwellers in developing countries is still an important question. Empowering them to be among global players in the knowledge-based economy can only be done by making them aware of the importance of information. Understanding the information-seeking behavior of rural communities will provide important clues on how to design, develop, and implement effective and useful information products and services.

ICT awareness and promotion

In many developing countries, governments are already aggressively addressing the digital divide. Investments are being made to reach out to rural communities through ICT-related initiatives. However, ICT is not the end itself. Developing informed citizens should be the ultimate goal. Bridging the digital divide must also look at ways to bridge the gap between the “information haves” and the “information have-nots.”

Local content development

More local content is needed to address the information needs of rural communities, particularly in communities that follow oral traditions. E-content development promotes active community involvement which also encourages rural communities to capture and preserve local knowledge and traditions through ICT. Repackaging local content allows greater access to information. For example, a sizable number of non-literates in rural communities can benefit from information repackaged in audio or video formats.

Who is responsible?

The simplest answer is “everyone.” ICT providers, information professionals, content developers, system designers, researchers, and policy makers must work together to create an informed citizenry. These stakeholders are important intermediaries to disadvantaged groups in society. They are mediators and social transformation agents.

Strategizing on the role of libraries and information agencies

The role of libraries or other information agencies in developing countries must be redirected and reoriented, particularly in how to reach out to rural communities. Selling information that would translate into demand for ICT requires close collaboration with the rural communities.

Potential research areas

The move towards information-based rural community calls for research in a number of areas.

- Understanding information needs and information-seeking behavior of rural communities.
- Studying the perceptions of rural communities on ICT and the required skills to be developed for their information needs.
- Identifying information agents in rural communities and their potential roles.
- Proposing community-centered digital initiatives.

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